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ABSTRACT

The resource constraints and increasing demands mandated by state and federal programs have made it difficult for rural and small schools to provide a developmentally appropriate education for all their students, but especially for middle level students, many of whom have been identified as "at risk." This paper focuses on recent research in the role of affective education, based on a recognition of the important role of identity development in assisting students to navigate successfully their passage through this transitional stage into adolescence. Possible links among affective education and self concept, characteristics of rural learners, and "at risk" factors are explored. Findings suggest that progress cannot be made in overcoming the "at risk" factors or in addressing the characteristics of the rural learner unless self-concept needs are first met on a positive basis. A multicultural unit instruction model is presented as an efficient strategy for meeting the interacting needs of middle level learners. A chart shows the linkages between middle school objectives, the framework for unit teaching, and rural learner needs. (Contains 15 references.) (ND)

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MULTICULTURAL THEMATIC INSTRUCTION: ONE STRATEGY FOR MEETING MIDDLE LEARNER'S AFFECTIVE NEEDS

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MULTICULTURAL THEMATIC INSTRUCTION: ONE STRATEGY FOR MEETING MIDDLE LEARNER'S AFFECTIVE NEEDS

Interest in the self has been evident in American psychology since the beginning of the twentieth century, but until fairly recently it was the behavior oriented psychologists who dominated the field. The works of humanists Combs (1959), Rogers (1969), and Purkey (1970) emphasize schools and classrooms centered on the positive self-concept; classrooms that are student centered by virtue of being positive and genuinely caring. It is Purkey (1978) who first focused our attention upon the learner and the connections between a positive self-concept and academic achievement. The affective development of middle level learners should be of major concern to educators in middle schools due to the critical nature of this stage of development. Early adolescence is a sensitive and vulnerable stage for self-esteem. This transitional stage tends to result in lower self esteem as the student struggles with the turbulence and confusion inherent in this major growth spurt (George & Alexander, 1993; Allen, *et al*, 1993). Affective education, based upon a recognition of the importance of identity development, plays a major role in assisting students to successfully navigate their passage through this transitional stage into adolescence

SELF-ESTEEM NEEDS OF LEARNERS

The resource constraints and increasing demands mandated by state and federal programs have made it difficult for rural and small schools to provide a

developmentally appropriate education for all their students, but especially for the middle level students, many of whom have been identified as at-risk students (Meyer, 1994). In order to understand the necessity for addressing the self-esteem needs of rural, at-risk middle level learners, we need to explore the possible links among affective education and self concept, characteristics of rural learners, and the appropriateness of using multicultural thematic units as the vehicle for addressing all of these elements.

RURALITY ELEMENTS

In his publication *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools* (1994), Stern cites the definition of rural communities used by the census bureau. The census bureau defines a rural community as having less than 2500 inhabitants or as having a population density of less than 1000 inhabitants in a square mile. According to Helge (1990) fifty-one percent of all schools in the United States are located in small towns or rural areas, and twenty-three states have fifty percent or more of their students in rural and small schools. To bring this information home, of the ninety-one school districts in the state of South Carolina, sixty-one have been identified as rural by the South Carolina State Department of Education (1993). With a majority of students enrolled in schools classified as rural in our state, we obviously have a mandate to meet their specific needs. This mandate is not unique only to South Carolina.

In meeting their specific needs, it is necessary to understand that the research indicates there are differences between the learning characteristics of urban and rural learners. If this is the situation, we must become knowledgeable about the specific characteristics of rural learners in order to facilitate the teaching/learning process. These characteristics are that they are: likely to be global learners, have a strong preference to cooperate with others, have an aversion for individual

recognition, see learning as a social experience, have difficulty with set time frames, prefer to have information transmitted orally and in a social setting, and they exhibit a sense of powerlessness concerning events and the environment (Potterfield & Pace, 1992). As we add this information to our existing knowledge of the importance of affective education at the middle level, we are compelled to further examine the need to include affective education to support the development of a positive self concept in the middle level learner

SELF CONCEPT ELEMENTS

Middle school students enrolled in middle schools fall within Stage Four (ages six or seven through ages eleven or twelve) and Stage Five (ages eleven or twelve through age eighteen) of Erikson's psychosocial theory. The need for independence and peer acceptance is heightened in this stage of development as students are engaged in a search for a "sense of self." Their sense of self becomes more consistent with how others view them during this stage. With regard to self-esteem, it is our position that there are two critical periods of time at which students are most vulnerable. One is during early childhood when young children make their initial contact with schools as students. It is here that they first grasp the concept of their own individuality. The other is during the middle school years when students begin to question the validity of their own individuality as they search for the "sense of self." It is also our position that this period is extremely critical because it may well be the last opportunity we as educators have to effectively support the development of a positive self-concept which these individuals will carry with them for the remainder of their lifetimes.

AT-RISK ELEMENTS

At-risk factors and self-concept factors interact in the lives of middle learners.

Numerous researchers have founded that these students feel alienated in the school environment, and students self report that they have negative perceptions of themselves in relation to schools (Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988; Keaster *et al*, 1993). To worsen the problem, growing numbers of students are being classified as disadvantaged and/or learning disabled which places them at risk. Among the factors leading to the classification of at-risk among middle level learners are poverty, the home life of the student, racial produces, and problems arising from the school environment (Bloodsworth & Fitzgerald, 1994). Allen, Splittgerber, and Manning (1993) elaborate upon the problems arising from the school environment by naming lower grades, test scores, retention in one or more grades, discipline problems, higher truancy rates, absenteeism, tardiness, detentions, and higher suspension rates as factors which place middle level learners at-risk.

In the midst of middle school reform, we talk and write about meeting the needs of the middle level learner by addressing all the various domains. For example, the state of Maryland identified four major goals of middle grade education in the report *What Matters in the Middle Grades* (1989). These four goals are that middle level education should address: (1) academic outcomes from a broad curricular framework, (2) the development of a positive self-concept, (3) respect for others and appreciation of the diversity of cultures, skills, and talents of others and (4) the development of a positive attitude toward learning. It is our position that in order to meet these middle school goals, the primary emphasis must be upon the affective needs of the learner before the remaining goals can be accomplished.

Major interactions occur in the daily classroom life of middle schoolers as factors of self-esteem, the characteristics of all learners, and elements placing the student at-risk interact and have a major impact upon one another. It is the self-esteem concept that is at the heart of the problem, and progress cannot be made in overcoming the at-risk factors or in addressing the characteristics of the rural learner

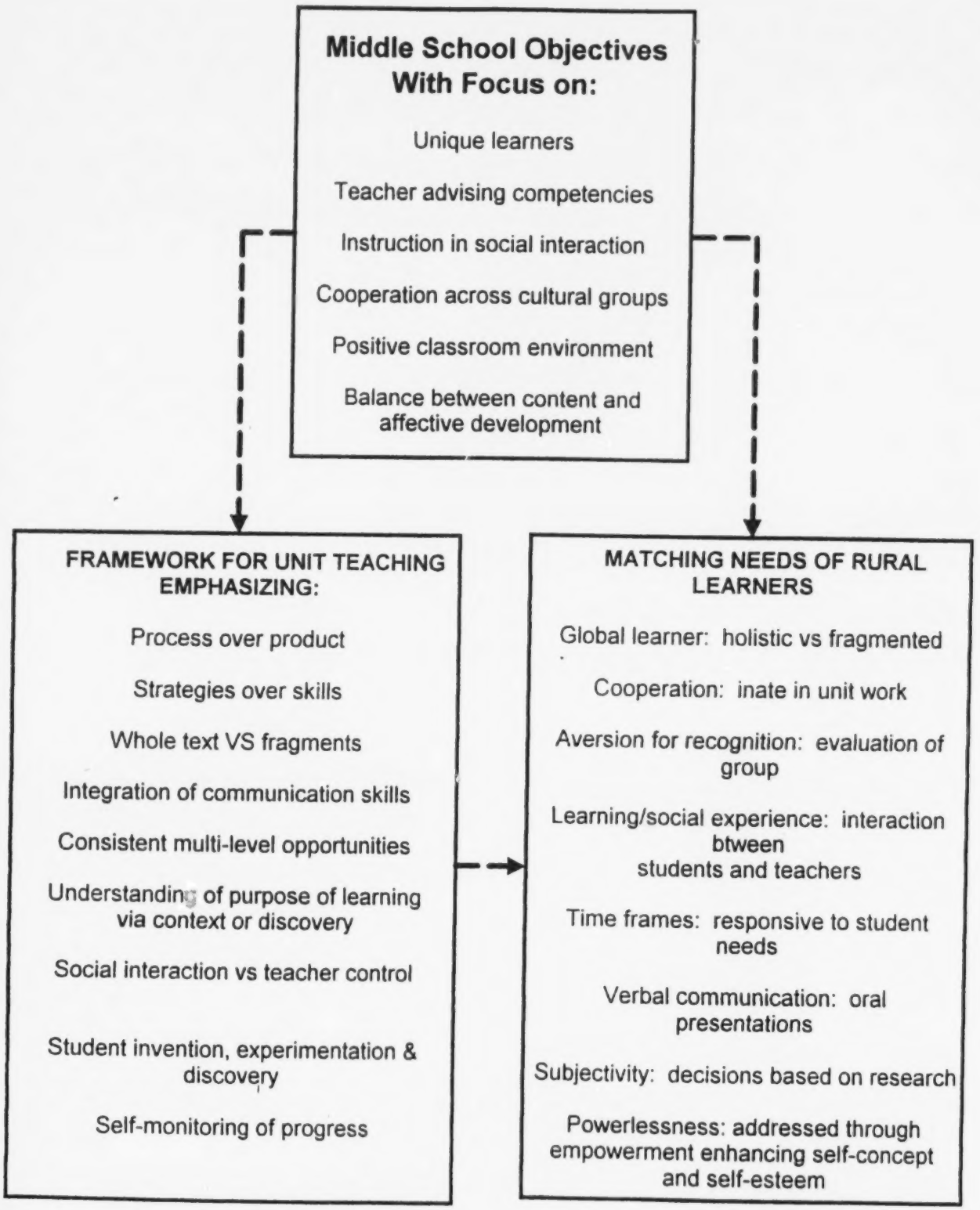
unless the self-concept needs are first met on a positive basis. The next section of this paper will describe a model for addressing the interaction and integration of these factors through the use of multicultural thematic units of instruction.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL

The use of multicultural unit instruction is an efficient strategy for meeting the interacting needs of middle level learners, since the use of an integrated instructional model is one of the major thrusts of the middle school reform movement. Teachers are well aware of the benefits of using unit instruction to enhance cognitive development, but may be less aware of the advantages of this type of instruction to support the development of the affective domain. A perusal of the charts that follow will assist the reader in identifying the linkages between middle school objectives, the framework for unit teaching, and rural learner needs. One can also infer from these charts the ever underlying connections with the enhancement of a positive self-concept.

SUMMARY

The position of the authors is that educators must address the affective development of rural middle level learners if students are to become successful in both classroom environments and the world of work. Far too often we have only addressed cognitive development while accepting the theoretical basis for addressing all domains. We have inadvertently implemented an integrated curriculum based upon a fragmented view of the rural middle schoolers. The middle schoolers' self-concept may well be the most important factor for educators to consider. Yet, we remain heavily involved with standardized test and test scores as proof of student cognitive development and teacher effectiveness. The danger inherent in this approach is that it results in a BSAP (South Carolina's required


Middle School Objectives With Focus on:
Unique learners
Teacher advising competencies
Instruction in social interaction
Cooperation across cultural groups
Positive classroom environment
Balance between content and affective development
FRAMEWORK FOR UNIT TEACHING EMPHASIZING:
Process over product
Strategies over skills
Whole text VS fragments
Integration of communication skills
Consistent multi-level opportunities
Understanding of purpose of learning via context or discovery
Social interaction vs teacher control
Student invention, experimentation & discovery
Self-monitoring of progress
MATCHING NEEDS OF RURAL LEARNERS
Global learner: holistic vs fragmented
Cooperation: inate in unit work
Aversion for recognition: evaluation of group
Learning/social experience: interaction btween students and teachers
Time frames: responsive to student needs
Verbal communication: oral presentations
Subjectivity: decisions based on research
Powerlessness: addressed through empowerment enhancing self-concept and self-esteem

Basic Skills Assessment Program) mentality by judging school and student success by the results of standardized tests, with little or no attention given to progress in affective development as manifested in lower absenteeism, fewer tardies, fewer discipline referrals, and increased student self involvement in classroom activities.

In order to genuinely address the objectives of today's effective middle schools as well as meeting the needs of the middle level learner, we must first develop the affective domain of the students as a foundation/basis for meeting these overall goals. Many educators view the sole reason for assisting in the development of a positive self-concept as supporting students' progress in cognitive development. This view is far too narrow. When we view cognitive development as one of the components necessary for increasing the growth towards positive self-esteem, we address both cognitive needs and affective needs while also assisting the student in combating the perils of many of the at-risk factors described earlier.

The reader is challenged to take another perspective in viewing the rationale for supporting the affective development of rural middle learners, and to consider one model for supporting the affective development through strategies that meet both the learners' needs and the guidelines developed by researchers of effective middle schools and by professional organizations.

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